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ABSTRACT

Literary critics have frequently credited Owen Wister with the invention of the modern Western novel. Yet when compared to the modern cowboy stereotype, the supposedly prototypical text of "The Virginian" defies its author's apparent convictions of Western masculinity. This bestseller includes most of the now classic elements of a Western novel: comical tall tales, a tense card game, laconic chivalry, rugged individualism, an ambush, a lynching, and a climactic gunfight. However, at times "The Virginian" reveals the unexpected burden of the cowboy's manhood, bringing the masculine code itself into question. The web of relationships in the novel is far more complex than in the typical Western novel. And Wister's personal life reinforces the unexpected complexity of "The Virginian." Like his title character, Wister experienced the psychological burdens of an oppressive social code. Born to a refined Philadelphia family, Wister was a Harvard graduate, an amateur actor, and an accomplished classical pianist. Forced to pursue a legal rather than a musical career by his father, Wister's depression led to poor health for which he was sent west to recuperate. Some scholars see his novel as a "personal diary" which provided an outlet for the expression of deep feelings. For today's students, who may have seen "The Virginian" on television reruns, a chance to read the original novel and to analyze the reasons for its massive popularity may also shed some light on a mythical chapter of American culture. (Contains 14 references.) (NKA)

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The Unexpected Burden of Manhood in Owen Wister's The Virginian : "Can't yu' see how it must be about a man?"

by Donald C. Jones

Literary critics have frequently credited Owen Wister with the invention of the modern Western novel. Lee Clark Mitchell identifies *The Virginian* as "the transitional text - responsible all by itself for the emergence of the . . . cowboy hero" and lists over a dozen critics whose concurring opinions create near unanimity (65, 75). Among those included, John Nesbitt hails Wister as the "father" of the Western genre (199), and Wallace Stegner congratulates Wister for "the triumphant ontogeny of the cowboy hero" ("Foreword" vii). With *The Virginian* 's publication in 1902, Wister established a cultural icon from a figure whose previous depictions had ranged from coarse cowherders to heroic horsemen (French 222). Yet when compared to the modern cowboy stereotype, Wister's literary son is like the mischievious male offspring of a straight-laced minister; at times, this supposedly prototypical text defies the author's apparent convictions of Western masculinity.

This bestseller includes most of the now classic elements of a Western novel: comical tall tales, a tense card game, laconic chivalry, rugged individualism, an ambush, a lynching, and a climatic gunfight. 1 Immersed in these elements, Wister's Western son initially seems to be rugged, reserved, self-reliant, self-assured, and sometimes violent enough to please any patriarch of Western masculinity. Yet, in passages of curious rebellion, Wister's son does not equal this cultural icon now immortalized by rid'em cowboy paperback and cinematic Westerns. I believe *The Virginian* has generated a genre which cannot contain the original text itself, and in an equally rebellious reading, I want to analyze those moments when the Virginian defies his authorial father's and the subsequent genre's standards of Western masculinity. This defiance reveals the unexpected burden of the cowboy's manhood and brings his masculine code itself into question.

In the first chapter entitled "Enter the Man," Wister's embodiment of Western masculinity exhibits the strength and grace of "muscles flow[ing] beneath his skin" with tiger-like "undulations." 2 To this animal vigor, the narrator in the next few pages adds the "splendor" of a "slim, young giant, more beautiful than pictures" (3) and "potency" of a "whole man" (6). Unlike his successors whose masculinity increasingly depends upon their virility, the Virginian's heroic stature also depends upon his discerning eye and his rhetorical flair. 3

The Virginian first attracts the Eastern narrator's attention when this tenderfoot notices his capture of an elusive pony with a sudden, surpentine

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lasso throw. As the narrator continues watching his Western mentor, the Virginian's acute perception and linguistic prowess distinguish him from his compatriots. For example, the Virginian discerns that Uncle Hughey's "Sunday clothes . . . . are speaking mighty loud of nuptials" and his marital jokes amuse the narrator until the comical groom departs (2). Then the narrator fears he will become the next target of the Virginian's humor until this compelling character instead addresses him with a "civil Southern voice" (6). Begining with the opening chapter, *The Virginian* demonstrates that a Western man "knows his business" (2) with a lasso and with language !

The Virginian dominates the card game confrontation more through verbal mastery than physical action. After distinguishing between his friend Steve's joking use and the villain Trampas' offensive utterance of "you son-of-a ____" (9, 18), the cowboy hero does not force his rival to back down through the barrel of his gun; he merely holds his pistol unaimed on the table. Rather by his now famous rhetoric of "When you call me that, smile !" (18), the Virginian persuades the villain Trampas to back down. In the opening chapters, it is not his fast draw, but the Virginian's rhetorical skill which is repeatedly demonstrated when he rebuffs the patronizing narrator, outwits the drummer, and flirts with the proprietress. In fact, with the exception of the Virginian's beating of abusive Balaam, physical violence rarely occurs and is curiously understated in *The Virginian* .

Even during the showdown, Lee Clark Mitchell explains that "the gunshots themselves are unseen and unheard" by the participants. Instead with a detachment that defies the later genre, Trampas' lethal shots are reduced to sleeve-pulling puffs of wind to which the Virginian "replie[s]" with deadly aim (302). The conversational verb "reply" so conflates language with action that the Virginian's victory depends upon his ability to control language even "in the face of his greatest physical danger" (Mitchell 68). The Virginian's greatest challenge, in fact, comes not from the holster of villain but from the lips of the schoolmarm.

The courtship between Molly and the Virginian is described as a "battle" and a "campaign" (81, 159) with the opponents vying for "ownership" and "victory" (81, 91). When the schoolmarm is introduced in a chapter which parallels the first entitled "Enter The Woman," she appears as an alluring "sheet of note paper" which proffers "a free language, altogether new to him" (Wister qtd. by Mitchell 72, see Wister 39). Initially, Molly's literary learning seems so antithetical to the Virginian's Western ways that this cowboy imagines his horse devouring her books! As in his ridicule of Rev. McBride, the Virginian has to expropriate his rival's language in order to gain his victory.

The Virginian soon thwarts Molly's intention of being his "superior and indulgent [literary] companion" when he dismisses *The Mill on the Floss* as the work of a garrulous woman (88). Later . the "cow-puncher unfold[s] his notions of masculine courage and modesty" in order to 'correct' Molly's reading

of Browning's poetry (219). These discussions represent not a verbal communion of the sexes but an exhibition of the cowboy's rhetorical mastery, especially when his interpretation of Browning re-affirms the stoicism of men.

The Virginian's rhetorical dominance and quiet equanimity initially appear to be natural and effortless. As Trampas tries to stir the ranch hands to mutiny against the Virginian, the narrator notes that the hero sleeps "like a child" (127). After defeating Trampas with the tall tale of the "frawgs" legs, the Virginian lapses into nine days of virtual silence which seems to reinforce the laconic cowboy image. There, however, may be much more simmering beneath this calm surface of male reserve. The Virginian's self-possession is not so effortless when Trampas later slyly insults his rival by taking his rope and then dropping it upon return. The Virginian's inner tension boils over when he snaps "Don't talk so much" to the inoffensive narrator just after Trampas' rope insult (137). This outburst suggests that it is erroneous to equate a cowby hero's silence with equanimity.

The quiet facades of these laconic men actually mask their inner strain as demonstrated during Steve's lynching. When the Virginian and his vigilante group capture two rustlers, neither the condemned Steve nor the Virginian can act upon their once friendly feelings. Instead they both must feign indifference before the hanging because when a cowboy "look[s] upon life with a man's eye," its "sadness" is "seldom" supposed to be shown "openly" (275). To act otherwise would be to forfeit one's manly honor as the other cowardly rustler does by showing his "naked fear" before dying (247). Yet, as Steve's note later admits, he did possess other emotions which he wanted to express, but he could not have maintained his masculine bearing if he had spoken to his friend "Jeff" (264). This admission supports Mitchell's assertion that physical action is often dependent on rhetorical mastery in The Virginian .

After the lynching, the narrator compares the Virginian to a "gallant swimmer" strugging against the currents of his own emotions (260). Although he cries out during his now troubled sleep, the Virginian next morning is "ashamed to have been that weak" (261). He can only conceive of his emotions as emanating from the "little boy sleepin' " inside the adult male (261). Rather than wake to the validity of his feelings, the Virginian affirms the lynching as "what [he] had to do" (281) because according to the code of manhood, any outburst, sob, or word of doubt could only be construed as coming from a coward or a child - both beings deemed inferior to a man.

Just as the Virginian's equanimity isn't really effortless, neither is his reserve absolute. Western men do engage in frank and flowing discourse, but they do so only with those who tacitly understand and rigorously observe the rhetorical rules of their code. To the uninitiated Eastern narrator, the Virginian and Scipio seem to maintain their manly reserve because only among Western men do the brief phrases "He . . . he" and "Don't change your clothes" express Shorty's betrayal and Trampas' threat (166, 288). These few syllables actually

speak volumes among Western men, but this inconsistency is concealed by the code's prohibition of emotional expression in general and analytical discussion of the masculine code in particular.

It is equally easy to overlook the actual cooperation between these rugged individuals. The outcome of the Virginian's tall "frawgs" tale, for example, depends on an ally like Scipio to confirm the comic results : "Rise up, liars, and salute your king!" and thereby preclude any wrangling (125). The climactic showdown also reveals that the masculine code is perpetuated by cooperative men who actually resist its individualistic requirements. When the Virginian's impending matrimony to Molly is endangered by Trampas' showdown ultimatum, Scipio rejects the saloon-keeper's offer to jail Trampas until after the wedding because he claims "such matters must always be, between man and man" (290). Scipio then, however, provides a context for compromise by explaining, "[i]t's the whiskey" that has loosened Trampas' insolent tongue (291). When Scipio warns the Virginian not to disarm himself, his terse message of "Don't change your clothes" is described as "the first and last help he would be likely to give" (290), yet this rugged individual actually offers words of encouragement before, precautions against ambush during, and tears of joy after the gunfight. These tears make manifest that these apparently stoical men are indeed "full of sentiment," but they are "empty of words" with which to articulate their repressed emotions (289).

During the duel, the burden of the masculine code is dangerously exposed when the Virginian meets a manly iconoclast who is almost his rhetorical equal. This daunting figure, of course, is not Trampas, but Molly. The schoolmarm has already proven that she can be the "man" when she rescues the wounded Virginian after an Indian attack (208). In the debate preceding the duel, Molly proves to be the Virginian's rhetorical match when her objections expose the actual basis of his Western masculinity.

When Molly threatens not to marry the Virginian if he meets Trampas for the showdown, he seeks the advice of the local Bishop. The Virginian argues, "I have given her my life . . . . I can't give my--my--we'll never get at it, seh. There's no good in words" (296). Then he disrupts the conversation in exasperation because to continue would be to state his unwillingness to relinquish his manly honor and to name the masculine code explicitly would subject it to criticial analysis. In his excellent article on male hegemony in The Virginian, Mitchell does not recognize that the cowboy hero's dependence on language, given its post-modern instability, leaves his Western masculinity vulnerable to deconstructive critique. The crucial weapon in the showdown between Molly and the Virginian will be the power of naming, not the violence of shooting. When Molly tries to object to the gunfight as "murder" which "they hang people for!", the Virginian "sternly" rebuffs this negative connotation, "Don't call it that name" (298). To further defend the gunfight to Molly, he explains, "I work hyeh. I belong hyeh . . . . If folks came to think I was a

coward . . . . I could not hold up my head again" (298). This justification unintentionally reveals that the Virginian's behavior is conditioned by his Western community, rather than being dependent on an innate masculinity as is suggested by earlier phrases like "natural man" and an "untamed man" (281).

When Molly tries to appeal to "a higher courage than fear of outside opinion" (298), she counters with the non-conformity of Emerson and Thoreau of her native New England. The exasperated Virginian again interrupts his disputant, "I am goin' my own course . . . Can't yu' see how it must be about a man?" (298). This pleading interruption, however, exposes the contradictory warrants of the Virginian's code : the purported individualism of his "own course" and his actual allegiance to his community's construction of Western masculinity. The Virginian does not assert 'Can't you see what it is to be a man?' which would posit an inherent, inviolate masculinity. Rather his use of the obligatory "must" implies his behavior has to conform to his society's masculine construct. The Virginian has been 'civilized' into the community of cowboys whose code necessitates the showdown with Trampas and conceals its own context by precluding discussion of the code itself as unmanly.

Before the duel, the Virginian had "two minds" about his proper course and his indecision moves him to tears (293); afterwards, this heroic horseman uncharacteristically yearns to tell "his friends everything" (303). Only his haste to return to his intended wife precludes this self-disclosure. After Molly's tearful capitulation to her gunslinging groom, the newlyweds' honeymoon further shows that the Virginian is less the master of manly rhetoric and more its oppressed subject.

The honeymoon island represents both a geographic and a psychological retreat for the Virginian as he takes his bride to a setting high in the mountain pines where the Western world -- with its gender constraints -- is recognized as being "far from here" (307). Forrest Robinson has described the honeymoon as the Virginian's withdrawal from "his dual, incomplete, and finally incompatible allegiances to the natural and the civilized" (36). He seems to define 'natural' as the cowboy's "context of violence and . . . code of survival" (Robinson 36, 37), but the Virginian's violence in word and deed to ensure his individual survival is not innate, but conditioned by his Western masculinity.

The Virginian previously has come alone to this idyllic island to strip off his cowboy trappings and indulge in an unconventional nakedness of his flesh and his feelings. When Molly proves capable of sharing his appreciation of the island retreat, the Virginian repeatedly exults, "better than my dreams" (306, 308). For they have come to a place where the newlyweds can withdraw from the confining constructs of Western gender roles. Although the Virginian provides for his wife on their first night, he promises to teach her the manly tasks of tying the pack-ropes and pitching the tent. When the Virginian observes the beaver, he projects his own yearnings onto this creature in order

to question "the gain in being a man" (310). When the Virginian responds, "the trouble is, I am responsible" (310), Robinson asserts that the cowboy hero refers to his adult responsibilities (28), but the use of the term "being a man" rather than a non-animal 'human' makes it difficult to overlook the gendered consciousness of the Virginian's burden. As a man in the Western code, the Virginian is burdened by his responsibilities as a rugged individualist, as a dominant foreman, and as a chivalrous husband. Fulfillment of these obligations depends upon his rhetorical mastery and physical dominance as a Western man, and to perpetuate this construct of masculinity, he is obligated to repress those emotional and verbal responses which would subject the code to scrutiny.

Robinson further explains that rather than continue to bear these responsibilities, the Virginian ultimately yearns for the oblivion of death (28), but this distinction between life and death, like the previous dichotomy of nature vs. civilization is too reductive. This island retreat is situated far above the "cottonwoods" which repeatedly symbolize death (238, 241, 251). On the honeymoon island, the Virginian realizes the possibility of another life when he defies his professed allegiance to rugged, reserved individualism and admits his repressed desire for tender, vulnerable intimacy which Western masculinity labels antithetically as Eastern and feminine. The "bliss" of the Virginian's intimacy with Molly melts the reserve which "his lonely life had bred in him" (312).

The Virginian's realization that "He never would have guessed so much had been stored away in him" manifests the discrepeney between his Western facade and his actual emotions (312). Unfortunately, neither the Virginian nor Molly can transcend completely the masculine code and its patriarchal rhetoric. She considers the Virginian to be a "dreamy boy" when he utters, "what I did not know at all . . was the way a man can be pining for - for this - and never guess what is the matter with him" (310). Although this cowboy is no longer ridiculing Uncle Hughey and of "queer" marriage (2, 167), he is unable to articulate "this" other, more expressive form of masculinity so it is relegated to a childish dream which can only be fulfilled by an occasional wedding anniversary sojourn to this secluded setting.

After this honeymoon retreat, the Virginian reverts to the conventional manhood of his community where he becomes a prosperous man of importance whose "strong grip" provides his wife with "all and more than she asked or desired" (316). Yet Molly's character fades to a faint "she" who yearns for a ride together rather than his "killing" and isolating work for material excess (317). Like the rest of Wister's tale, this concluding paragraph conceals its curious rebellion by appearing to corroborate Western masculinity. The Virginian's longevity seems to prove his rugged individualism as his eldest son rides his still sturdy mount Monte. Only the stock sunset of a Western's conclusion seems to be missing. For Wister's deceptively complex text can

easily be streamlined into the yep and nope, rid'em and shoot'em up Westerns of his progeny because, as Mitchell explains, the "compelling suggestiveness" of passages like the showdown direct "attention away from [the] language" which allows "a tantalizing sequence to be reduced to a series of straightforward scenes of violence" in the subsequent genre (Mitchell 68), such as Louis L'Amour's *Hondo* of 1953.

Wister's method of composition supports this rebellious reading of his prototypical text. Although Wister worried that a perceptive reader might be able to discern the "scissor marks of the author's cut and paste job," John Cobbs asserts that the very strength of the novel lies in its layering of incident upon incident; many of which were taken from seven previously published short stories. The totality of these revised vignettes and the additional scenes create "the multifaceted character of [Wister's] cowboy hero" (Wister qtd. by Cobbs 73 and Cobbs 81). This complexity corresponds to the "late nineteenth century vogue of evolutionary thought" which viewed life as constantly changing and perpetually developing towards ever greater integration of opposing elements. William Bogard asserts that the static opposition between the regional associations of Eastern, cultured, urban, ethnically mixed, and feminine and their Western counterparts found in Wister's short stories achieve a more dynamic synthesis in his popular novel (Bogard 22-4, 27). Most critics concur that *The Virginian* represents the synthesis of disparate regional values, literary forms, and actual texts; and when they are combined, Edward White asserts that this cultural synthesis depicts "the best features of nature and civilization, rugged individualism and gentlemanliness, past and present, West and East into a more perfect whole (143). Neal Lambert also states that Wister attempted the integration of "essentially contradictory systems of values" so The Virginian invites divergent readings (100).

Wister's own personal life also reinforces the unexpected complexity of *The Virginian* . Like his title character, Wister experienced the psychological burdens of an oppressive social code. Born to an refined Philadelphia family, Wister was a Harvard graduate, an amateur actor and writer, and an accomplished classical pianist. At age twenty five, he was forced by his father to forsake his musical promise and pursue a legal career which Wister considered to be a "detested occupation" and a "gloomy thing" (Wister qtd. by White123). His dread and depression led to a nervous disorder and poor health for which Wister was sent West to recuperate in 1885.

Sanford Marowitz contends that *The Virginian* can be read as a therepeutic "personal diary" as well as a Western epic ("Testament" 556), and Jane Tompkins adds that this novel provided its author with "the opportunity to express feelings he had no outlet for elsewhere" (151). For example, part of Wister's pleasure in his summers spent in Wyoming came from knowing that his overprotective mother "would hate nearly all of it" (Wister qtd. by White124). The physical and psychological relief Wister found in the West

included the environment elixir of the cool, "sharp air with the sharp odor of the sage" (Wister qtd. by Bogard 23) and the emotional expressiveness of one of his acknowledged inspirations for the fictional Virginian tenderly care for his ailing wife (Payne 81). The cultural dialectic usually depicted between East and West as refined, feminine, and garrulous vs. rugged, masculine, and reserved is more complex than Lambert, White, or Bogard have proposed.

Wister went West to avoid the stultifying career chosen by his father and the oppressive criticism of his mother. He was rejuvenated by the "spontaneous, open western society" (Payne 124) because it provided this artistic male with life experiences unencumbered by the contraints of legal principles and Philadelphia gentility. Wister's notebooks are filled with his pride in being a "brilliant listener" who was able to "completely [break] the ice" and learn "the history of [the] life" of "a handsome as a hawk" cowboy (Wister qtd. by White126). In Wyoming, Wister found not an arid land of laconic, repressed men, but a more vital, direct way of living. Since Wister went to Wyoming seeking spontaneity, virility, and independence, it should not be inconceivable that his Virginian is a Westerner yearning for permanence, vulnerability, and intimacy. As Martin Pumphrey explains, the cowboy is not diametrically opposed to the Eastern or feminine, rather the Western hero is positioned between refined women and anarchic villains. On the frontier between cloying female goodness and degrading non-Anglo evil, Wister's Saxon cowboy stands tall by being "both dominant and deferential, gentle and violent . . . individualist and conformist, rational and intuitive . . . . Quite simply, the hero's masculine toughness must be partially femininized" (82). When the complex characteristics of Wister's original figure are conceived as gender-related traits, then the Virginian's synthesis of supposedly contradictory male and females qualities exposes the flaws of the subsequent rugged, reserved cowboy.

Like Jane Tompkins and Lee Clark Mitchell, I believe that *The Virginian* represents both the prototypical Western and the "counterargument" of "something like an anti-Western" (Tompkins 151 and Mitchell 67). As an advocate of racism, Anti-Semitism, social Darwinism, and laissez-faire economics, Wister seems like an unlikely author of a critique of Western masculinity (Boatright 160-2). Yet when Wister tried to adapt his bestselling novel into a stage drama, he found himself unable to write for three months (Cobbs 25-6) which, according to Mitchell, "suggests the author's subliminal resistance to reducing the novel's powerful ambivalence" (75). Through this admittedly rebellious, deconstructive reading, the unexpected burden of manhood in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* is revealed.

For today's college students, who may have seen "The Virginian" on TV reruns, a chance to read the original novel and to analyze its massive popularity may also shed light on a mythical chapter of American history and development.

NOTES

1. According to John Cobbs, *The Virginian* was greeted with "unprecedented public acceptance" as it was reprinted fourteen times in its first eight months of publication (24, 73). After this immediate success of selling 100,000 copies in less than one year, Wister's Western has been "perennial[ly] popular" according to John Nesbitt as demonstrated by its sales of 1.6 million hardcover copies between 1902 and 1952 (199, 208).

2. Owen Wister, *The Virginian: Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Signet Classic, 1979), p. 1. All subsequent references to this text will be identified by page number in parenthesis.

3. Both Zane Grey's *Lassiter of Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) and Louis L'Amour's title character of Hondo (1953) also demonstrate their acute perception and linguistic prowess. For example, Lassiter perceives and evades the snipers that encircle Jane Withersteen's house, and Hondo intentionally insults his Indian captor Silva to provoke a fight and prevent his torture. Unlike *The Virginian* , these Westerns, however, emphasize the physical actions of Lassiter and Jane eluding their Mormon pursuers and of Hondo defeating Silva in hand to hand combat. Following the chronology from Wister's prototype through his literary successors, the importance of the cowboy's rhetorical mastery decreases.

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